DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 157 052 CS 004 272

AUTHOR Mikulecky, Larry
TITLE Aliteracy and a Changing View of Reading Goals.
PUB DATE May 78
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (23rd, Houston, Texas, May 1-5, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Literacy; *Functional Illiteracy; Illiterate Adults; Job Skills; *Needs Assessment; Reading Ability; Reading Difficulty; *Reading Habits; Reading Interests; Reading Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Aliteracy

ABSTRACT

In addition to the familiar problem of functional illiteracy (the inability of adults to read at a basic level) another distrubing problem is becoming apparent--aliteracy. Increasing numbers of capable readers are choosing not to read. This problem is indicated by a 1969 survey that found that 58% of United States adults have never finished a book, and a 1973 study that indicated that only 26% of adults read magazines. Even in school and at work, very little reading is done. Minimum standards programs deal with symptoms but not with such causes as the ever-rising standard of literacy to be met by readers or the problem of poor parental modeling in reading in the home. A balanced program for the solution to aliteracy must include these three emphases: (1) functional literacy must be viewed as a changing level of ability relative to changing job expectations. (2) The ability to continue learning must be recognized as a basic skill in view of the high likelihood of job change and consequent retraining needs. (3) Since aliterate individuals are likely to fall short of the demands of continued learning and to be poor reading models to their children, schools must emphasize the development of positive reading habits and attitudes among future parents. (DF)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED157052

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

A Paper Presented at the International Reading Convention
Houston, Texas
May, 1978

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Larry Mikulecky

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

ALITERACY AND A CHANGING VIEW OF READING GOALS

Larry Mikulecky
Reading Department Indiana University-Bloomington

The Present and Near Future

There are indications that while reading/writing abilities have generally been improving over the last fifty years, the demands for sophisticated literacy in our society have been increasing more rapidly than these improvements (Weber, 1975). During World War I, when nearly a quarter of the draftees couldn't read or write their own letters, such men could still anticipate being able to select from a variety of life and occupational choices. An illiterate or partial illiterate was hampered but could still easily function in society. The percentage of individuals able to read and write their own letters has increased since WWI, but so too have the literacy demands required to function in society. News stories about illiterate high school graduates have focused on a dramatic tip to an iceberg that also includes auto mechanics unable to comprehend repair manuals, bureaucrats unable to follow written policy changes, technicians unable to read and understand safety precautions for oil pipe lines or nuclear power plants and anyone else who has found the literacy demands of a job outstripping his or her abilities. The term "functional literacy" denotes a standard that seems to be rising depending upon one's job or function and depending upon the changes and new complexities likely to continue increasing as individuals race to keep up with new occupational developments or attempt to retrain for new occupations.

CS004272

In terms of our current situation, the term "functionally illiterate" can be applied to large segments of our population.

At the same time, the United States is experiencing another distributing phenomen - aliteracy. Increasing numbers of capable readers are regularly choosing not to read. For example, in countries like Canada, Great Britain Australia and Germany the percentage of citizens reading in books is from two to three times greater than the percentage of U.S. citizens reading in books (Mann and Burgoyne, 1969). A 1969 Gallop-poll reveals 58 percent of adult Americans claim to have "never read, never finished" a book. A typical response to these reports is that busy Americans don't have time for books and read magazines instead. A random survey of over 5000 American adults, however shows only 26 percent to be reading magazines (Sharon, 1973). This same survey dispels the myth the Americans read more on weekends than on week days. The clear majority of adult reading was shown to be done on the job (an average of 1 hour and 46 minutes daily) during the week.

The same sort of phenomenon seem to be evident and perhaps even fostered in schools. Little reading is done except for assignments, for the job. Positive reading habits and attitudes seem to deteriorate with each successive year students spend in school (Bullen, 1972 and Mikulecky, 1976). A recent survey of early adolescent reading during summer and during the school year revealed that almost no reading was done over the summer by early adolescents (Mikulecky, 1978). Twenty-five percent of 100 randomly surveyed students reported summer reading of less than 10 minutes a day. The mean reading time was only slightly above a half hour (36.9 minutes). During the

school year the mean reading time jumped to slightly over an hour, (66.9 minutes), but nearly 80 percent of that time was allotted to reading homework assignments. The American pattern of reading mainly "for the job" seems to be starting early with reading mainly "for the teacher."

The Problem of Minimal Standards and Survival Literacy

It's becoming noticable to nearly all levels of society that "we have a problem here." Nearly every town and school district has a "back to basics" movement and a number of states have made moves toward establishing some sort of minimal competency for high school graduation. Slogans and arguments from the "Johnny Can't Read" controversy of a generation ago are being revised and reworded. Parents, boards of education, legislative committees, and concerned citizens are looking for solutions to the growing gap between the increasing reading demands of society and the existing reading habits and abilities of society's members.

Perhaps the most wide-spread and popularly accepted explanation of what has occurred to literacy over the last twenty years revolves around the overly simplified notion that schools and teachers have somehow failed us. The popular argument usually goes something like this:

> Teachers are less dedicated than they used to be and are more concerned about themselves than they are with the education of our children. There has been so much experimenting with new methods and classes that the basics of reading and writing have been ignored. The schools are more interested in just passing students from grade to grade than they are in teaching. Something's wrong here and if you don't believe me just look at the stories in the newspaper about kids graduating without being able to read. Besides that young people don't spell as well as they used to.
>
> We need to stop experimenting with our children and get down to basics. What good is a high school diploma if it doesn't mean anything? We need to cut out the frills and make sure the teachers are teaching what our children will need to know in order to get jobs.

The above argument is, of course, oversimplified and collapses together complaints that don't necessarily need to be expressed together. I believe the argument does, however, reflect a general political mood and I believe legislatures and boards of education are increasingly sensitive to that political mood. The public is articulating legitimate concern over symptoms of the increasing literacy gap over flagrant publicized abuses within the educational system. Both responsible and less responsible elected officials would like to visibly address the concerns expressed by their constituents. It is the manner in which these concerns are addressed that becomes a problem.

The concern of parents and other citizens can be accepted as legitimate. The most often voiced explanations for why reading problems exist ought not to be as easily accepted as legitimate, however, without close examination. Unfortunately the sense of a crisis atmosphere and the tendency to focus on dramatic extremes (illiterate graduates) makes it politically feasible to implement simplistic solutions to a very complicated problem. The rationale, of course, is that during this current crisis any action is better than letting the situation deteriorate further. Legislatures and boards of education rush to implement minimum standards lest still more illiterates graduate. The minimum standards are an attempt to plug a leak in the educational system and, as such, are useful for early identification of students in trouble. At least two corporations (Educational Testing Service and McGraw-Hill) have entered the market place with their versions of tests for "survival literacy" standards or "minimal standards."

These steps at establishing minimal standards, or at least recognizing students missed by the education system, are necessary steps. They are very likely to be useless steps, however, if we slip into letting all our emphasis rest upon identifying survival literacy skills and then mainly teaching to those skills. The reason for the likely failure of most minimum standards programs is that most programs ignore or don't take aliteracy into account. The main concern of minimum standards programs is that the individual, at some point during his or her schooling, be able to read basic materials (want ads, job applications, road maps, etc.). I know of no current program, however, that also concerns itself with: Does the individual read and will he or she be likely to continue reading once he or she leaves the school? In short, I know of no current program plans that put equally heavy emphasis on developing reading and learning as a habit, as well as an ability. Instead, many students are actually dissuaded from developing positive reading habits by singular over emphasis on a steady program of basic skills.

Need to Deal with Aliteracy and Illiteracy Simultaneously

Minimum standards programs, as needed as they are, cannot hope to succeed in their own right because they deal with symptoms and not causes. Part of the reason the problem of functional illiteracy has intensified is that the standards of literacy have been rising and will continue to rise. The high school graduate who passes the standards of the 70's without learning a habit of reading will be likely to find himself sub-standard again in the 1980's or even sooner if it comes time to retrain. If an individual has read virtually nothing for a decade, as is true of a growing percentage of our adult population,

his literacy abilities may even have deteriorated below the minimum standards outlined for him to receive a diploma in the 70's. His aliteracy, or lack of the reading habit, may guarantee his continued, life-long functional illiteracy.

A second reason for the imminent failure of minimum standards programs that ignore aliteracy is that such programs fail to anticipate the vicious circle of adults who don't choose to read in turn creating children who don't read and don't choose to read. Hanson (1969), in a carefull study of variables related to success in learning to read, found parental modeling of reading with their children to be more significant in reading success than any other factor. Programs that emphasize basic skills only in order to prepare students to pass a minimum standards test are likely to create even more individuals who cease reading as soon as the pressure is off. The siblings, the children, and the peers of such aliterate students and later aliterate adults are even more highly likely to need special training to meet minimum standards. A program that treats symptoms and not causes, that focuses on illiteracy while ignoring aliteracy, could well help produce a never-ending supply of illiterates.

To summarize, then, we are currently facing two inter-twined literacy related difficulties. The standards and expectations for functional literacy are rising and the number of capable readers who regularly choose to read is decreasing. The political climate is such that legislatures and boards of education are ready to deal with the most dramatic symptoms of the problems, illiterate high school graduates, by proposing minimum standards programs. Such programs may place too much emphasis on treating apparent symptoms while ignoring some of the still operating causes of the literacy difficulties.

To teach basic skills while de-emphasizing or even discouraging the development of life-long reading habits is likely to produce more aliterates who choose not to read when the pressure is off. As functional literacy standards continue to rise such individuals are unlikely to keep up and may even fall below their original high school levels. In addition, the model of more adults who choose not to read and thusly influence their children can only serve to strengthen the vicious circle of non-reading families generation after generation.

The Examples of Japan and Norway

One way to gain some perspective on this inter-related tangle of problems is to examine patterns of literacy habits and literacy training in other cultures and countries. Two industrialized nations that have minimal evidence of literacy difficulties are Japan and Norway. Though the cultures of these nations differ widely, some interesting similarities in educational approach exist.

In Japan, schools and parents participate to a great extent in read-at-home programs. Very young children are regularly read to in their mother's laps and entire families participate in cooperative reading time and reading model programs. Time for literacy and reading habit is given a planned priority position in both school and home. Literacy models and cooperative parent-child learning are planned into each child's experience (Namekawa, 1976).

Norway's educational system is also designed to provide a maximum opportunity for development of positive reading habits and for influence of positive literacy models. Parents have much more time to play a role in the

direct early literacy training of their children. According to a study conducted by Olaf Larsen of Kristiansand Teachers College, most Norwegian children don't begin schooling until age seven and attend school for only 15 hours per week during the first three grades. A third of this time is direct reading and writing instruction. Parents in the home must provide a heavy influence in the direct sharing and training of literacy. In addition children have the same teacher for the first four years and therefore have the benefit of another long term adult literacy model (Ekwall, 1973).

There are, of course, many other factors which play some part in the low illiteracy rates of Japan and Norway. Japan is a highly competive society that places clear economic emphasis on education and Norway has achieved a high standard of living for the majority of its population. In addition teachers and clear academic standards for teachers are held in high regard. The fact does remain, however, that each successful nation places a good degree more emphasis than the United States upon direct parental involvement as positive literacy models. Habit rather than basic ability receives prime emphasis as evidenced by the Japanese criteria for a remedial reader i.e., "a child who hasn't read a book during the month of May" (Namekawa, 1976).

A Balanced Solution

Careful, thoughtful analysis of future needs and analysis of underlying causes of present difficulties can suggest workable solutions to both aliteracy and the increasing functional literacy gap. Tragic symptoms like the illiterate graduate need to be dealt with, but in a sensible manner that attacks causes and offers a reasonable chance for success. Putting massive

efforts and energies into establishing and teaching to minimum standards is not going to create the necessary underlying environment (i.e., Japan and Norway) for reduced illiteracy and may instead contribute to the vicious cycle of aliteracy and functional illiteracy.

Students and adults need to be aware of a variety of personal and career choices available to them. Almost certainly the majority of adults will need to feel comfortable and competent with print in order to continue learning, whether that learning be to keep up with one's job or to retrain for a new occupation. Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman may anticipate a brave new world of mass media learning, but the economics of education is highly likely to dictate that such retraining instead occur through print media as part of on-the-job training. Air conditioner repairmen, real estate brokers, teachers, and construction contractors will learn about new developments in their fields mainly through reading or through classes that involve a good deal of reading.

On a more idealistic note, to the extent that a democracy is built upon an active, knowledgeable citizenry, adults can be expected to have to continue learning even more. The lesson of the seventies seems to be that our lives are, to a great extent, influenced by the sense we make out of political issues and then what we choose to do about our knowledge. More and more ordinary citizens find themselves taking active roles in shaping their own futures through consumer groups, environmental groups, right-to-privacy groups, censorship groups, anti-censorship groups, union/management confrontations, farmer's strikes, and any number of direct involvement activities.

It is growing more difficult to hide. The choice seems to be between preparing our young for literate thoughtful involvement or letting them become easily manageable pawns. The demands of a participatory democracy give the term "functional literacy" a whole new depth of meaning.

What this variety of realistic needs implies is a balanced solution with at least three areas of equal emphasis. These areas of emphasis focus around the following understanding:

1) Functional literacy must be viewed as a changing level of ability determined by the particular expectations of one's tasks (job) and by continuing changes in jobs and tasks,
2) Given the high liklihood of occupation change and retraining needs, the "ability to continue learning" must be seen and taught as a basic skill, and
3) Since aliterates are likely to fall behind the demands for continued learning and also likely to be poor reading models who foster children with reading problems, schools also must emphasize the development of positive reading habits and attitudes among future parents.

It is crucial that each of these three areas receive clear emphasis. To ignore any single area of these three would only serve to undercut gains made by over-emphasis in a single area. For example, massive emphasis to improve ability levels will and has proven futile if students don't, at the same time, develop the ability to continue learning and develop the reading habits necessary to foster continued learning. Though the current

education system certainly must accept its share of the responsibility for school problems, it seems clear from research that a generation of adults who choose not to read and not to model reading for their children must be seen as part of the problem. If schools develop students who become non-reading, aliterate adults, then schools are helping to create their own future problems. Establishing minimum competency levels will do little to solve those problems since minimum levels do not address the roots of the complex vicious circle of reading difficulties.

Maintaining this necessary balance of emphasis will prove difficult over the next several years. The social, political, and economic trends are rushing towards the definition and teaching of minimum competencies. Reading educators from local classrooms through national decision-making bodies will be under a great deal of pressure to accept and support minimum competency programs. Many of those programs will contain much worthy of support. At every level, however, we must call for solutions that include training to meet minimum competencies but also provide the time, energy and resources to confront the underlying educational causes of reading difficulties. We must demand and make sure that work in which we participate provides a balance of emphasis from teaching basic skills, through learning how to learn, to developing the positive reading habits and attitudes necessary for continued learning. We must educate students to become adults who contribute to their children's reading growth rather than ignoring or discouraging such growth.

References

Bullen, G. F. The development and validation of a reading attitude measure for elementary school children. Washington, D.C.: Office of Education, Project No. 1 A045, ERIC ED 109211, 1972.

Ekwall, E. Psychological Factors in the Teaching of Reading, Columbus, OH: Charles Merrill, 1973, 21-30.

Gallop, G. The Gallop Poll. New York: American Institute of Political Opinion, 1969.

Hanson, H.S. The impact of the home literacy environment on reading attitude. Elementary English, 46 (Jan., 1969), 17-24.

Mann, P. H. and J. L. Burgoyn. Books and Reading. London: Andre Deutsch Ltd., 1969, 13-33.

Mikulecky, L. The developing, field testing, and initial norming of a secondary/adult level reading attitude measure that is behaviorally oriented and based on Krathwohl's Taxonomy of the Affective Domain. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1976.

Mikulecky, L. How much do middle schoolers read and why? Unpublished research study available through author: School of Education, Indiana University-Bloomington, Bloomington, IN 47401, 1978.

Namekawa, M. Children's literature and reading in J.E. Merritt (ed.) New Horizons in Reading: Proceedings of the Fifth I.R.A. World Congress on Reading. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1976.

Sharon, A. What do adults read? Reading Research Quarterly 9, No. 2. 1973-74, 148-169.

Weber, R. Adult illiteracy in the United States in Carroll and Chall (eds.) Toward a Literate Society, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975, 147-164.